

HOW TO KNOW WHEN YOU'RE HEARING FROM GOD

SO, BY NOW YOU MAY HAVE A NAGGING QUESTION: CAN divine direction be misunderstood or lost in translation as it makes its way from heaven down to earth? Put more forthrightly, can human beings make it up or mess it up once it arrives?

The honest answer is yes. Hearing from God is not like receiving a text message or reading an email. We humans can get in the way. Believe me, I am more than capable of hearing what I *wish* God were saying rather than what he is actually telling me—and perhaps you are too. Discerning God's direction is somewhat subjective, but it's not arbitrary. Even though God's whispers are rarely tangible, there are concrete steps we can take to help us discern if we're hearing from God or hearing from the bad sushi we ate last night. What we are about to explore in this chapter can *significantly* lower the likelihood of us hearing a message that is not God's.

Acts 13 offers a window into how a first-century prompting arrived on the scene and how the leaders of the church processed it. There is something we both can learn from evaluating this episode.

Acts 13:1–3 says, “Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul [who would become the apostle Paul]. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”

Before we jump into the rest of the passage, let me provide a little context. Antioch was an incredibly diverse city where the Christian message had recently arrived. People crossing many racial and ethnic lines were receiving Christ and flowing naturally into the church. Saul was a Jew. Barnabas was from Cyprus. Simeon was a black-skinned man from northern Africa. Lucius most likely was also black-skinned, from Cyrene, which is present-day Libya. And Manaen grew up in royalty, living with the family of Herod. It would have been a challenge to find five men more different from one another, but here they are—in the same church—together in heart and mind, leading a dynamic community of faith at Antioch. Then one day, while they were in a spirit of worship, a whisper from heaven came their way.

We read in Acts 13:2 that the Spirit tells the five leaders of this local church that Saul and Barnabas should be “set apart.” In other words, these two guys should stop doing what they have been doing in the Antioch church, and they should prepare to be sent out on a new kingdom assignment. Nothing more specific is offered by way of helpful information, but the leaders test the whisper, find it to be authentic, and before you know it Saul and Barnabas are packing their bags.

IN ORDER TO RECEIVE MY DEGREE IN BIBLICAL STUDIES AT Trinity College in Deerfield, IL, I was required to write a senior

dissertation on a Scripture passage of my choosing, As you might guess if you're familiar with the core theme of my teaching over the years, I selected Acts 2:42–47, the classic text about the rapid and radical development of the early church.

At the time, I was leading the youth group I mentioned earlier, believing with all my heart that I was going to give the rest of my life to those kids who had become like family to me. Lynne was pregnant with our first child, Shauna, and we had just purchased a tiny house in Park Ridge, a few blocks away from the church. Our plan was to settle down, dig in and serve the students for a long time. The last thing I was expecting was a life-altering whisper.

My father owned a lakefront condominium in downtown Chicago, which he offered to me as something of a writer's retreat so I could complete my dissertation in peace and quiet. I gathered up my study materials and headed downtown where I planned to hunker down and write for four days straight.

On day three of my writing, the Holy Spirit impressed the following message on me: "What you are passionately writing about—the beauty and power and potential of the local church—is going to become the thrust of your life. I am going to release you from the responsibility of leading this youth group so you can start a church—an Acts 2 church. I will bless that church so that eventually it will become a community of faith that offers the hope of Christ to many people, young and old."

Although I hadn't heard an audible voice, the refrain of that impression washed over me again and again that day. It seemed clear to me that something big was up.

After I completed my required writing assignment, I packed up my things and drove home to Park Ridge. That night, I invited Lynne out to dinner where I nervously recounted the promptings I felt I had received. I think my closing remark—delivered in

my classically compassionate style—was something like, “Hope you haven’t unpacked all the moving boxes yet, honey.”

My wife is truly a saint.

What’s more, the whisper I’d received rang true to her spirit too, and she became as excited about the dream of starting a church as I was.

Within a few months, we said goodbye to those thousand students and began looking for a place to launch a church. We walked into our future having no secure job, no support from any organization and no idea if our new plan would strike a responsive chord with anyone. What we did have was the confidence that stems from receiving a clear whisper from God. We had placed our trembling hands in his strong ones and were confident that it was *his* lead we were following. It was not lost on me that the entire series of events could be traced back to a few days of solitude, when I was quiet enough to hear God’s voice.

BACK IN ACTS 13:2, WE READ THAT IT WAS WITHIN THE CONTEXT of worship and fasting that the Antioch leaders heard their whisper from God. In this position of surrender before their Lord, they were able to hear him speak.

In the course of ministry life, I meet many people who claim to have never heard the promptings or whispers of God. Not even once. Sometimes when I probe a little deeper, I discover that their lives are so full of noise that they can’t possibly hear the Holy Spirit when he speaks. Cell phone calls during their commute, boisterous restaurant gatherings with friends, a houseful of excitable toddlers or countless hours of reality TV provide a constant roar of distraction that drowns out any whisper that might be sent their way.

Time and again, the Scriptures tell us to be still. “*Be still, and know that I am God. . . .*”¹ Psalm 46:10 encourages. Reduce your speed. Stop multitasking. Lower the ambient noise of your life—and *then* listen for God to speak.

Jesus himself adopted this practice during his ministry here on earth. The biblical record shows that Jesus wove into the fabric of his everyday life the disciplines of prayer, solitude, reflection, fasting and worship. He had favorite places to be alone with his Father and favorite places to pray in private. When he faced major decisions, his pattern was to withdraw from the crowds around him and to devote time to solitude and prayer. Not surprisingly, the net effect of a lifestyle like that was the increasing likelihood of hearing from his Father.

Before selecting his twelve disciples, Jesus went off alone and spent an entire night in prayer. He needed to hear from his Father regarding the individuals he planned to select and knew he must quiet himself so God’s wisdom could come through. Later, when Jesus was preparing to endure the agony of the cross, he withdrew to the garden of Gethsemane, where he and the twelve disciples had often prayed. There he and his three closest friends prayed; then he prayed alone. His devotion to hearing from God motivated him to take purposeful, intentional action in order to create a space where God’s whispers could be heard.

That’s the same level of devotion—and action—I recommend for you and me.

There is a God who loves you and who would gladly whisper to you words of encouragement or direction, wisdom or well-timed warning, if only you would carve out the space to hear from heaven throughout the course of your day.

I’ve said those exact words to many people over the years and sometimes I have sensed in their response, “Thanks, but no thanks. I’d rather make my own judgment calls.” In my view,

these people are running the risk of missing out on some of life's greatest God-guided adventures.

God tends to speak to people who want to hear from him. He tends to offer divine direction to those who are willing to order their daily lives around receiving input from him. So, what does that look like?

I would recommend reading and reflecting on a biblical passage and then saying to God, "If you have anything to tell me, I am very eager to hear it." Then, just listen. People whom I most respect spiritually are those who integrate this kind of practice into their lives. In everyday conversation, they talk about their spiritual disciplines with ease because their habits actually back up the claims they make.

For many years I have been fascinated by the specifics surrounding where people tend to quiet themselves in the course of their day. Some have a favorite chair in the living room. Some head to the office an hour early and simply close the door. Some journal and pray on a commuter train as they make their way to work. Some venture into a neighborhood coffee shop and hole away at a corner table. The time and place tends to vary, but for all these people the practice is absolute. And what happens as a result of their consistency is that they consistently hear from God.

For what it's worth, my own daily practice involves reading a portion of Scripture, mentally chewing on it for a few minutes, then writing down my observations and reflections on what I've read. After that I close my time in prayer.

To that last point, it works better for me to write out my prayers. Especially on work days, I've noticed that when I get down on my knees and try to pray silently to God, my mind focuses more on upcoming meetings than on the divine communication at hand. The solution for me is to write things down.

Once I jot down a page or so of petitions and points of thanksgiving, I then read my entry to God. Afterward I always say, "God, I am going to be listening for you all day long, but knowing me, I'll be moving pretty fast today, so I might miss a prompting or two. While I'm in my current unrushed state, if there's anything you'd like to say to me, I'm all ears." Truth be told, some days I sense a message coming from him—an impression, a word of encouragement, a nudge to say or do something specific that day—and some days I don't. Either way, I close out my quiet time with God and then do my best to listen for his voice throughout the rest of the day.

On some occasions the promptings I think I have received from God make perfect sense, but on other occasions they leave me totally confused. This is where discernment with whispers comes into play. Christ-followers must carefully test every impression they receive to be sure it is from God and aligned with his purposes. But how does one do that?

Let's revisit our text. Remember, the church leaders were worshiping and fasting when the Holy Spirit told them to set apart for him Barnabas and Saul for the work to which he had called them. Most scholars agree that Acts 13:3 suggests that after the leaders received that initial message, they did a second round of fasting and prayer, then "they placed their hands on them and sent them off."

I think there is a lesson here for us to learn.

Before these leaders rushed to action, they slowed down to be sure they correctly understood what the Spirit was asking them to do. They turned again to the disciplines of fasting and prayer. They double-checked the prompting they were about to act on. And *then* they obeyed without delay.

OVER THE YEARS I HAVE COMPILED A SHORT LIST OF FIVE filters that help me “test every whisper” I receive. If a whisper fails to make it through one of these five, I question whether the whisper is really from God. At the very least, I move slowly to confirm the whisper’s validity. At other times, a whisper makes it through these filters with no problem. In this case, no matter how confusing, challenging or unsettling a prompting may be, I attempt to obey it.

FILTER #1: Is the Prompting Truly from God?

The first filter is to simply ask God, *“Is this message truly from you?”*

Years ago, when my kids were junior-high age, a man whom I did not know approached me and told me that within thirty days my children were going to be “struck down” because of my style of ministry, which welcomed nonbelievers into the “house of God.” He looked sophisticated and was very articulate, and I remember his opening statement being, “Pastor Hybels, I have a prophetic word from God to deliver to you.” He had my attention from the get-go, but as soon as I understood what he was saying, I knew we were going to have a very difficult conversation.

As he spoke, the first thing I had to assess was whether his warning aligned with what I knew of the character of God as revealed in Scripture. Thankfully, it did not. His underlying premise for stating that my kids were going to suffer was that I was violating Scripture by attempting to use our public church services to point non-believing people to faith in Jesus Christ. From Genesis to Revelation, God extends himself to human-kind at every turn; I felt confident that my evangelistic efforts through Willow were not in violation of Scripture. Because this

man's opening assertion was patently false, I didn't think I could trust his further comments.

What's more, even if his underlying assumption *had* been correct—even if I had somehow been violating the mandates of Scripture—I would have discounted his warning that my kids would be asked to pay for my mistakes with their lives. Although there are a few times in Scripture when God disciplines children for the sins of their fathers, usually God disciplines the wrongdoer himself.

I believed this man's "prompting from God" was probably of his own making, a belief that was affirmed when my children—thankfully—were still alive and well at the end of that thirty-day period.

Whenever you receive a prompting—whether from God directly, or through the lips of another—be sure to test it. Take whatever time is necessary to ask, "God, is this message from you? Does this square with who I know you to be? Is it consistent with your character? Is it aligned with your attributes? Is this *you* trying to convey something to me, or are there other voices getting into my head?" Before taking a single step to obey the whisper you've received, be sure you get the all-clear that the voice you have heard could be from God.

FILTER #2: Is It Scriptural?

Next, run the prompting through the *Scripture filter*.

Several times a year someone will tell me that the reason their life is in shambles is because God "told" them to do something absurd.

"God told me to cheat on my wife."

"God told me to drop out of school with one semester left."

“God told me to quit my job, even though I have four kids to support and no other source of income.”

I can't tell you how many jobs have been lost, educations have been foregone, marriages have been destroyed, bank accounts have been blown, all because someone felt sanctioned by God to take a particular action.

Scripture is replete with examples of how God would behave in any given life situation, and the Example's name is Jesus Christ. Whenever I sense a prompting from God, I ask myself if I could imagine Jesus taking whatever action I am considering taking. If I can't envision Jesus following suit, I fear my wires somehow must have gotten crossed.

If you need a straightforward starting point in this regard, check out Galatians 5:16–26, which says:

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there

is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

Now, in case you glazed over these verses because of their familiarity, let me give a portion of the passage to you again, this time in *The Message* transliteration.

Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit. Then you won't feed the compulsions of selfishness. For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit, just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness. These two ways of life are antithetical, so that you cannot live at times one way and at times another way according to how you feel on any given day.

But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

You and I both could do worse than to commit these ideas to memory. When we are motivated by God, we walk in freedom. When we are motivated by selfish interests, we will be inclined to interpret as “messages” from God messages that we have, in fact, created to satisfy something or someone other than God.

Check every prompting you receive against the thematic teachings of Scripture. Messages that contradict Scripture are not from God.

FILTER #3: Is It Wise?

A third filter I use in determining the veracity of various whispers is the *general-wisdom test*.

Jesus was fond of telling his followers to be *wise* at all times. “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves,” he says in Matthew 10:16. “Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.”² The entire book of Proverbs is devoted to dissecting wisdom and all her attributes. For example, the wise one loves knowledge, while the fool hates it; the wise one practices gentle speech, while the fool uses harsh, incendiary words; the wise one lives blamelessly, while the fool is utterly corrupt; the wise one follows a straight path, while the fool rejoices in the perverseness of evil; the wise one inherits honor, while the fool is held up to shame. Scripture is relentless in exhorting us to be wise in all our dealings, to be wise in all our ways.

A young couple thinks of buying their first house. They love the one that is priced fifty-thousand dollars higher than their budget will allow. The real-estate agent lowers his voice and says, “If we don’t make an offer right now, it’s going to be gone forever.”

“Well,” the couple thinks, “maybe this is God telling us to act quickly...”

Or maybe not.

What would the path of wisdom tell them to do? Slow down. Walk out. Cool off. Stick to the budget that you wisely set.

Another couple tells their pastor in excited tones, “We’re getting married!”

“Great!” the pastor replies. “How long have you known each other?”

“Three weeks,” they say.

“Wow . . .,” comes the pastor’s less-than-enthusiastic response.

Again, slow down. Cool off. Give this thing a chance to bloom.

A businessman says, “I’m going to cash in my life savings and buy lottery tickets because God said I needed to make a huge contribution to the church.”

Any guesses as to wisdom’s response?

Be sure you’re not sidestepping what is wise in favor of acting quickly on whispers. If God is indeed in the plan, it will likely not involve blatantly unwise action. God’s direction rarely violates the wisdom test.

FILTER #4: Is It in Tune with Your Own Character?

Okay, on to filter number four. One of my favorite filters for verifying divine direction is what I call the *wiring test*.

Three years ago, my son Todd, then 28, decided to sail a forty-two-foot sailboat around the world. One night, he came over to the house and formally laid out for Lynne and me what he intended to do, providing us with a two-year plan he had clearly thought through in great detail. Mere seconds into his presentation, I received a word from God. “Todd’s entire life has been leading up to this adventure,” the prompting went. “This trip is perfectly consistent with the man I created him to be.”

As Todd kept talking, I thought, “This plan isn’t outrageous at all.” I considered all the parents I knew who would have been coming unglued if their kid was laying out such a scheme—they wouldn’t be able to see past their (quite understandable) fears